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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kuiper, G., & Gemählich, A. (2017). Sustainability and Depoliticisation: Certifications in the Cut-Flower Industry at Lake Naivasha, Kenya. *Africa Spectrum*, 52(3), 31-53. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-10783>

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Africa Spectrum

Kuiper, Gerda / Gemählich, Andreas (2017),
Sustainability and Depoliticisation: Certifications in the Cut-Flower Industry
at Lake Naivasha, Kenya, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 52, 3, 31–53.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-10783>

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
<www.africa-spectrum.org>

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs,
in co-operation with the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg, and Hamburg
University Press.

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Sustainability and Depoliticisation: Certifications in the Cut-Flower Industry at Lake Naivasha, Kenya

Gerda Kuiper and Andreas Gemählich

Abstract: This article focuses on the emergence of certification schemes in the cut-flower industry in Naivasha, Kenya. It is shown that, although this turn is often legitimised through references to “sustainability,” the change was mainly brought about by the growing importance of a new value chain of “direct sales.” The article furthermore elaborates on the most well-known certificate in Naivasha, Fairtrade. This certificate aims to enhance sustainability by empowering workers, yet it does not profoundly change power relations within the industry. The article concludes that “sustainability” in the context of Naivasha has been an ill-defined concept, used to legitimise a turn to certifications. Rather than bringing about a profound transformation of the production process, these certifications obscure and even consolidate the existing socio-economic configuration of the industry. Certifications thus run the risk of having “depoliticising” effects.

■ Manuscript received 4 April 2017; accepted 21 December 2017

Keywords: Kenya, international trade, agroindustry, flowers, industrial relations

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Lake Naivasha is known as the biggest cut-flower-producing region globally, consisting of approximately 55 farms covering over 2,000 hectares with greenhouses, employing an estimated 40,000 people, and producing roughly 8,000 metric tonnes of flowers, mainly roses, per month.¹ The floriculture industry in Kenya is driven by foreign capital: the first Naivasha flower farm was established by DCK, a Danish company, in the early 1970s.² Interviews with farm management indicate that even today, both the shareholders and top managers of the majority of the farms are predominantly European or Indian, not Kenyan. Since the early 2000s, there have been concerns that this “global” cut-flower production might cause the “local” social-ecological system around Lake Naivasha to collapse. Media reports began to appear with alarming headlines such as “The tragedy that is Lake Naivasha”³ and “Lake Naivasha is dying.”⁴ The biographer of environmentalist Joan Root also depicted such an apocalyptic scenario, as illustrated by the following description:

A bizarre, only-in-Africa scenario that had turned her [Joan Root’s] beloved lake into a war zone, in a conflict created by, of all things, roses [...] resulting in slums, squalor, crime, and some insisted, ecological apocalypse. [...]. The lake, from which the flower farms sucked up water and into which they spat back pesticides, was so contaminated that its demise was predicted within five years if immediate measures were not taken. (Seal 2010: xiv)

Non-governmental organisations’ (NGO) reports critical of labour conditions (e.g. KHRC 2012) and scientific work on the lake’s ecological state (e.g. Mavuti and Harper 2006) reinforced this image of the Naivasha flower industry as a profoundly unsustainable business, both socially and economically. However, the predicted collapse of the flower industry and/or of the Naivasha social-ecological system has not yet taken place. On the contrary, production numbers for cut-flowers have quadrupled compared to production volumes in 1995 and have almost doubled in the last 10 years (KFC 2015).

The discrepancy between the apocalyptic scenarios and the continuous growth of the flower industry has raised the question of how “sustainable” the industry really is, which has been evaluated by several re-

1 These estimates are based on interviews with stakeholders in Naivasha that took place between May and August 2015 and on statistics provided by the Kenya Flower Council (KFC 2015).

2 See *Daily Nation*, Why not try flower power?, 8 March 1978, 18.

3 *Daily Nation*, The tragedy that is Lake Naivasha, 5 October 2009, 15.

4 *The East African*, Lake Naivasha is dying, 20–26 July 2009, 8.

searchers and other interested parties (e.g. Tallontire et al. 2005; Food & Water Watch 2008; Riisgaard 2007, 2009, 2011; Mekonnen et al. 2012). However, despite featuring as a central concept in negotiations on the responsibility for the environmental and social consequences of the large-scale cut-flower production, the concept of sustainability is not well defined. This article therefore does not aim to evaluate the “sustainability” of the industry; instead, it explains how and why this concept has become influential within the global flower industry. Moreover, by describing the positions of both the Naivasha farms within the value chain and the workers within the farms, the article shows how a drive for “sustainability” has obscured power relations, analysing the ways in which the vague notion of “sustainability” has been used to legitimise existing practices rather than to bring about change.

These legitimisations play a role in various contexts – for instance, in lobbying and policymaking. However, the best example of the workings of “sustainability” are certification schemes. These are a set of formal institutions that take the form of standards

that transmit information to customers and end-users about a product’s technical specifications, its compliance with health and safety criteria or the processes by which it has been produced and sourced. (Nadvi 2008: 325)

Previous studies on the Kenyan flower industry have analysed interlinkages between standards and labour rights. These studies conclude that although labour conditions have improved, standards are ultimately a tool of governance within the cut-flower value chain and therefore do not challenge the underlying power relations (Hale and Opondo 2005; Nelson et al. 2007; Riisgaard 2007; Gibbon and Riisgaard 2014). Contributing to this debate, we argue that by using the vague concept of “sustainability,” standards not only effectively obscure unequal power relations within the industry but actually reinforce them. We thus analyse standards as tools of control over farms and labour.

This article is one outcome of an interdisciplinary collaboration between a human geographer and a cultural anthropologist. We conducted joint research in 2014 and 2015, mainly in Naivasha but also at other hubs of the flower industry, such as the Dutch flower auction. This article is primarily based on data gathered through semi-structured interviews⁵ and through visits to 18 certified and non-certified Kenyan flower

5 This included 35 interviews with farm managers, 36 interviews with farm workers, 24 interviews with stakeholders in Naivasha such as the union, government

farms. It is furthermore based on research of the Nation Media Group archive in Nairobi and on longitudinal observations during 19 repeated visits to a Naivasha flower farm that was in the process of becoming Fairtrade-certified.

The following section introduces the concepts of governance in the value chain, the governmentality of standards, and depoliticisation. In the sections after that, these concepts are used to explain the increasing number of certifications for cut-flowers and to analyse the effects of such certifications on the position of farms within the value chain. This empirical part ends with a description of the example of Fairtrade and its effects within individual farms. The article concludes with a discussion of the depoliticising effects of the omnipresent but ill-defined concept of “sustainability” in the context of the Naivasha cut-flower industry. This analysis indicates how “sustainability” is used as a legitimising tool in negotiations over responsibility across different scales.⁶

Governance, Governmentality, and Depoliticisation

The conceptualisation of governance in the global commodity chain (GCC) and global value chain (GVC) literature offers a framework to analyse changes in globally linked industries, in this case the increasing importance of “sustainability” within the global cut-flower industry. In these frameworks, governance is referred to as “non-market coordination of economic activity” (Gereffi et al. 2001: 4). Hence, it is used to analyse power relations within a value chain on an inter-firm level, including rules, institutions, and norms, and it deals with access to value chains and markets and the distribution of profits and costs (Fitter and Kaplinsky 2001: 77; Humphrey and Schmitz 2001: 20–21; Bair 2005: 159, 2009: 26). The original GCC framework distinguished dichotomically between producer- and buyer-driven chains (Gereffi 1994); in the more recently evolved GVC approach, this framework was expanded to five types of governance (Gereffi et al. 2005; Ponte and Gibbon 2005: 5–6).

agencies, and NGOs, and 24 interviews with other industry players such as lobby groups, traders, and representatives of certification schemes.

- 6 The authors thank Dr. Tijo Salverda, other participants in the workshop “Transforming Africa – Africa Transforming?” (Stellenbosch, 25–27 November 2017, organised by the University of Cologne), and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this article.

Certifications and their standards have become a central object of study. From a GVC perspective, standards are an instrument to reduce complexity. Their enforcement is a part of governance strategies and at the same time an expression of these. Moreover, standards are an entry barrier to economic networks and chains (Fitter and Kaplinsky 2001: 77; Kaplinsky and Morris 2001: 30; Gereffi et al. 2005: 82, 91; Nadvi 2008: 325–326; Bair 2009: 32; Sturgeon 2009: 117, 129). The GVC concept and its governance terminology have been used to analyse power dynamics in the cut-flower industry, including the role of standards (cf. Hughes 2000; Hale and Opondo 2005; Riisgaard 2009). Contributing to these debates, this article shows how standards in the cut-flower industry emerged as a result of dynamics in the value chain. It discusses the role of a drive for “sustainability” in new modes of governance within the industry. These new modes of governance took the shape of certifications, which use the vague notion of “sustainability” as their *raison d’être*.

Apart from describing how certifications emerged within the case at hand, this article also addresses how these certifications materialise in the production areas. Previous studies mostly focused on the Kenyan cut-flower industry on a national level and rarely focused on the local or farm level (cf. Hughes 2000, 2001; Gibbon and Riisgaard 2014). Therefore, with regard to the biggest production hub, at Lake Naivasha, this article elucidates what happens when certification schemes are put in place.

Although the upcoming certifications try to “coordinate economic activities,” they do not *originate* from the market itself (cf. Gereffi et al. 2001: 4). Yet, they attempt to make trade more “sustainable” through mechanisms that are *based* in the market rather than, for example, in government regulations. Instead of accepting involvement by the government, certifications try to govern themselves by regulating prices or introducing standards. The certifications thus have a certain “governmentality.” Several scholars have directed anthropological criticism of development aid, formulated in the late twentieth century, towards certifications:

Development from this perspective is seen as an imposition of Western assumptions that privilege scientific rationality over local knowledge and cultural traditions, not to mention over the desires of development “recipients” themselves. (Moberg and Lyon 2010: 13)

In her article on Fairtrade certification in Naivasha, Dolan (2007) pointed out that, even though Fairtrade proclaims to strengthen farms’ and workers’ positions, it is based on technologies for governing them:

This governmentality is visible in the technologies (e.g., standards, audits, and certification) that fairtrade organizations employ to

shape a certain type of African subject, one fully safeguarded by modern rights and protections. (Dolan 2007: 251)

These technologies leave little space for other – for instance, workers’ – values. One could thus question whether these certifications actually lead to emancipation, as it seems they might instead perpetuate existing hierarchies (Dolan 2010). However, Moberg and Lyon (2010) remind us that we should not assume that the techniques employed by certifications are always fully successful. Instead of taking the discourse at face value, we should investigate what these certifications do in practice: (how) did the adoption of certifications change socio-economic structures and power relations within the Naivasha flower farms?

In an attempt to answer this question, we apply the concept of “depoliticisation” as discussed by Swyngedouw (2014: 123), who drew attention to the rise of “a consensual mode of governance that has reduced political conflict and disagreement.” We argue that the shift to certifications and the introduction of new forms of “governmentality” in the Kenyan cut-flower industry led to a “depoliticisation” of labour relations and production processes. The following section starts this discussion by describing the shift to certifications.

Certified “Sustainability”: From Origins to Implementation

In the subsequent discussion of our empirical material, we show how the concept of sustainability and the rise of certifications changed the process of negotiating responsibility between producers, buyers, and consumers in the cut-flower industry. This process was set in motion by changes in the flower value chain.

The Emergence of a New Cut-Flower Value Chain

Certifications in the cut-flower industry first emerged in the early 1990s. One of the first schemes, MPS (More Profitable Sustainability), was initiated by the Dutch flower industry in 1993. Its aim was twofold: to develop strategies to reduce environmental impact, and to make these efforts visible in order to promote a positive image of the industry (MPS 2015).

Started as an industry initiative, standards rapidly gained importance in the late 1990s with the market entry of European supermarkets and the emergence of a new cut-flower value chain (Riisgaard 2009: 326). Traditionally, cut-flowers from Kenya were linked to the (European)

consumer markets via the Dutch flower auctions. In this value chain, Kenyan farms export their goods to the Netherlands, where they are put “on the clock”⁷ by their sales agents and bought mainly by wholesalers. The market entry of European non-floristic shops, mainly supermarkets, led to the emergence of “direct sales.” In this value chain, Kenyan farms sell flowers via sales agents to importers in the Netherlands that have year-round fixed amounts of supply for big retail chains.⁸ Although the direct sales’ shares and importance in the production and sales strategy of flower farms are increasing, both value chains coexist even in the sales strategies of most farms, and display multiple interlinkages (see also Hughes 2000: 182).

The emergence of direct sales as a second “strand” (Riisgaard 2009: 328) in the cut-flower value chain provoked fundamental changes in the cut-flower industry. Previous studies have argued that it led to a shift from a rather market-based governance, as formulated in the GVC literature (Gereffi et al. 2005: 86), to a classical buyer-driven chain (Hughes 2000; Hale and Opondo 2005; Riisgaard 2009): in the auction system, producers and buyers are not directly connected, as no one knows who will buy how many flowers at what price; hence, the relations between actors are rather loose. However, direct sales – as the name implies – establish direct connections between the producing flower farms on the one side and the buying retail chains on the other. Retailers prefer long-term relationships with farms and buy large quantities.

But how are these big buyers able to exert control within the value chain? Next to pricing pressure, volatile demands, and product specifications (Hale and Opondo 2005: 317–318; Riisgaard 2009: 328), our data shows that certifications are not only an expression of these control mechanisms, but also a tool to establish them. The introduction of standards engendered new types of business relations within the industry. Although long-term relations between growers, wholesalers, and retail chains remain mainly based on handshakes or oral agreements, formal sanctions have been introduced into the cut-flower value chain in the form of certification schemes. These schemes hardly play a role in the traditional, auction-based value chain, since only the MPS certification is displayed in the Dutch auction system. However, in the direct sales value chain, traceability, sustainability, and fair production processes are no

7 The flower auction works by using a clock showing prices and running down until a buyer is willing to accept the offered price.

8 Unless otherwise stated, the following data refers to observations on farms and interviews conducted with farm managers in Naivasha in 2014 and 2015 and with traders in Aalsmeer in September 2015.

longer left to informal institutions such as reputation or trust but have been translated into formal rules. Non-compliance with these formal rules is sanctioned, for instance, by a revocation of the certificate, which implies the exclusion of certain markets.⁹ These rules are not formalised in national laws or regulations but in numerous, market-based certification schemes. The two main features of these certification schemes are its assertions that it is creating a sustainable business, and the visible logo that transmits this assertion to consumers. The rising demand for sustainable, transparent products has become a major driving force behind consumer markets (Dolan 2007). Big buyers profit from this development in two ways: first, by offering the demanded products and, second, by translating this demand into an instrument of control over their producers without being part of the sanctioning process, which is left to the certification bodies.

Consequences for the Kenyan Flower Industry

The effect of certifications for the global and especially the Kenyan cut-flower industry have been discussed widely in NGO-commissioned reports (e.g. Klier 2012; Leipold and Morgante 2013; Wilshaw 2013; Happ 2016), but also in geographical studies (Hale and Opondo 2005; Riisgaard 2009; Raynolds 2012; Riisgaard and Gibbon 2014). The early expansion of the cut-flower industry and its economic success with profit rates up to 50 per cent¹⁰ are often at least partly explained by the lack of national and local regulations. Nevertheless, especially in Naivasha, environmental concerns have been addressed quite strongly over the past 20 years by the industry – for instance, a lake-management plan and water-abstraction limitations were initiated and funded by the floriculture industry. Combined with strong lobbies on both the regional and national level – orchestrated by the Lake Naivasha Growers Group and the Kenya Flower Council – that are actively marketing these efforts, flower-farm managers feel legitimised to state that their industry is sustainable. These statements are backed by local environmentalists, state agencies, and even researchers; for instance, flower farms were called the “model users” of the local water users’ association. The biggest risk for the sustainability of the industry is often seen as being linked to its economic success – determined by market dynamics.

9 Interviews with the Global Flowers Product Manager of Fairtrade Africa, 26 June 2015, Nairobi.

10 Unless otherwise stated, the following data refers to interviews conducted with farm managers and stakeholders in Naivasha in 2014 and 2015.

Flower growers claim to be engaged in enhancing sustainability because they have realised that saving their environment and supporting their employees pays off. One example of their engagement is in terms of water pollution: state agencies monitored an enhancement of sewage treatment plants, improving the quality of fresh water that is eventually reused by flower farms. The better the quality of the water, the lower the costs for the treatment it undergoes to make it usable for irrigation.

Considering this general shift towards a sustainable production of flowers, certificates can be seen as a barrier to market access rather than an indicator of sustainable production (Gibbon and Riisgaard 2014: 124). Flower growers need multiple certifications in order to get access to the value chain of direct sales; therefore, they tend to have as many as possible. Single certifications do not impact the farms substantially: requirements are often similar, so the efforts towards compliance are taken for financial rather than structural reasons (cf. Reynolds 2012). A recently Fairtrade-certified farm spent between EUR 3,000 and 4,000 to acquire the certification; these costs were mainly concentrated in the audit and in setting up the administrative structures, whereas the changes in the production process were negligible. Thus, the risk for growers when applying for additional certifications is quite low; combined with the buyers' demand for compliance, there is an incentive to become certified.

In conclusion, the main reason for growers to apply for certifications is not the indication of a sustainable production process but the wish to access the new buyer-driven value chain. Hence, by introducing certifications, sustainability (however ill defined) becomes "standardised," and non-compliance with this standardised sustainability becomes sanctionable. In addition, this standardised sustainability also becomes valorised, but only for buyers, as they can translate it into higher prices or at least a higher demand from consumers. To summarise, certifications seem to add little to sustainable production. Instead, they are a product of new governance structures and a stabilisation mechanism for these structures.

Fairtrade and Workers' "Empowerment"

The previous section has shown that the turn towards certifications in the Naivasha flower industry was driven by the governance structure in the value chain, not by a profound wish to make current production practices more sustainable. Nevertheless, these certifications and their standards have real effects on the production sites. This section probes into these effects. It takes the most well-known certification, Fairtrade,

as a case: what does Fairtrade do within the farms and in workers' communities in Naivasha?¹¹

Fairtrade provides an interesting case study because it has quickly gained in prominence in recent years. The first Fairtrade-certified flower farm in Naivasha received its label in 2003. Only 12 years later, in 2015, 15 farms (around one-third of the farms in Naivasha) were certified. Moreover, this specific certification, which targets consumers and not businesses such as florists, is prominent in the consumer markets in Europe.

Fairtrade is an atypical certification: unlike other schemes, it did not originate from the flower industry itself but stemmed from a broader political movement. It also works with products other than flowers. The original aim of the movement was to profoundly transform international trade and to decrease inequalities in trade relations. Fairtrade initially only worked with small-scale producers but in more recent years also included products produced by hired labour, such as flowers, and entered into mainstream value chains (Smith and Barrientos 2005). As stated by a representative of TransFair¹² in Germany: Fairtrade is the only certification scheme that aims to change an existing market.

The Fairtrade organisations explicitly aim to change power relations. One of the three pillars of the Fairtrade "theory of change" is the empowerment of workers (Fairtrade International n.d.: 8). Fairtrade Africa claims to enhance "sustainability" by strengthening the position of (both small-scale and large-scale) farmers and of hired labour: "By offering an alternative approach to trade, Fairtrade supports producers in securing better deals, contributing to greater sustainable development in Africa" (Fairtrade Africa 2015b). Fairtrade thus hopes to achieve a shift in power relations. However, it does so by securing a "fairer" price and a stable market. It is, therefore, despite its origins as a movement for alternative trade, firmly situated within a market logic. Along these lines, Luetchford (2011) argues that Fairtrade, rather than providing an alternative to regular trade,

11 Unless stated otherwise, this section is based on observations and interviews at a newly certified farm in Naivasha in 2014 and 2015 and on interviews with the Global Flowers Product Manager of Fairtrade Africa (Nairobi, 26 June 2015) and officers of TransFair (Cologne, 22 February 2017).

12 The Fairtrade representatives mentioned in the previous footnote explained that Fairtrade consists of several organisations: Fairtrade International, which sets the standards and provides an overall strategy; producer networks that are regionally organised, such as Fairtrade Africa; and national organisations in the markets such as TransFair in Germany.

offers something “extra.”¹³ In that sense, it has become comparable to other certification schemes that originated directly within the industry.

Nevertheless, although working within an existing industry, Fairtrade explicitly aims to reconfigure power relations, which is a final reason to take Fairtrade as a case here. In what follows, we discuss Fairtrade measures and their effects on power relations in the Naivasha flower industry. We do not aim to assess the impact on specific labour conditions, as have Klier (2012) and Happ (2016). Nelson, Martin, and Ewert (2007: 71), who likewise assessed the impact of codes of conduct, concluded that even though certain conditions improved, inequalities within the GVC remained. They raised the question of whether codes of conduct could move beyond addressing workers’ practical interests and include strategic interests. Based on an analysis of the effects of Fairtrade measures on power relations within Naivasha flower farms, we argue that addressing strategic interests is perhaps not even a goal of certification schemes, despite Fairtrade’s explicit proclamations to the contrary. Instead, the measures taken effectively “depoliticise” labour relations and production processes.

Fairtrade Standards

Fairtrade aims to strengthen the position of farms and workers through several measures. First of all, the Fairtrade “Standard for Hired Labour” and “Standard for Flowers and Plants for Hired Labour” contain social and environmental requirements, such as freedom of association and the banning of the use of certain chemicals. “These standards improve the sustainability of the farms and improve the quality of the working environment” (Fairtrade Africa 2015a: 4). There are specific standards for specific products, but geographically speaking they are applied universally. That is, the standard for flowers should be applied the same way in, for example, Colombia as in Kenya. These standards are designed and updated through a complex process involving many stakeholders, including the producers (Fairtrade Deutschland 2016). However, “producers” in the context of hired labour are the farms as such, usually repre-

13 In this article we take Fairtrade as the most prominent example of around a dozen certifications, to show their (depoliticising) effects in the flower industry in Naivasha. We do not aim to evaluate the broader fair trade movement. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to mention the large body of literature on the origins of Fairtrade, and on the directions it has taken recently, e.g. in regard to the inclusion of hired labour. For an overview, see Dolan (2010) and Moberg and Lyon (2010).

sented by local managers. Thus, workers are not directly involved in the setting of standards.

The Fairtrade standards – the “technologies” for governance (Dolan 2007: 251) – at first sight seem stringent: each page is full of obligations marked in bold font. However, whether the standards are always fully enforced is questionable. Farms are regularly audited, but interviewed workers and managers expressed criticism of auditors who look only at what is administered and not at actual practices (cf. Dolan’s [2010: 286] analysis of audits as “governing technologies”). Furthermore, it is also questionable whether all these obligations, even if enforced, would profoundly alter relations between employers and employees. A telling example are the papers put up in greenhouses and packhouses by the management that detail protocols on what to do in case of emergency such as a fire. No one seemed to read them; for one thing, they were mostly written in English, whereas the working language is Swahili. A greenhouse supervisor explained that these papers are merely there “so that if auditors come, they see that the workers are being cared about.”

Despite these difficulties, some measures included in these standards are implemented and effectively ameliorate the farm workers’ labour conditions. Examples are the provision of protective clothing and an increasing prevalence of permanent rather than short-term contracts (cf. Happ 2016). However, these are broader trends in the Naivasha industry, set in motion by market demands. For instance, Riisgaard and Gibbon (2014: 274) pointed out that a shift in the types of flowers produced and an increased demand for quality flowers induced a need for a stable workforce and thus enhanced the increase of permanent contracts. Moreover, the standards overlap partly with other types of regulation (cf. the comparison between the Fairtrade Standards and the Collective Bargaining Agreement in Anker and Anker [2014]). It is thus questionable how many of these positive practices can be ascribed to the implementation of the Fairtrade standard alone. Despite the (at first sight) stringent standards, much still depends on the willingness and the ability of those in charge, the managers of the farms, to (meaningfully) implement the prescribed measures (cf. Klier 2012).

Fairtrade Premium

A unique feature of Fairtrade is the premium. Fairtrade buyers pay a premium of 10 per cent of the commercial price, meant to be invested in “socio-economic and environmental projects” for the workers (Fairtrade Africa 2015b). This fund is managed by a Fairtrade Premium Committee

(FPC), containing elected workers and advisors from the management (Fairtrade International 2014: 9).

Dolan (2007), who carried out fieldwork in Naivasha 10 years ago, analysed the premium as a “governing” tool. Although our findings point towards the same conclusion, they nevertheless differ from Dolan’s in certain regards. Where she concluded that workers were mystified about Fairtrade and perceived it as another form of charity from “the white man” (2007: 253), the employees we spoke to a decade later were aware that under Fairtrade, a part of the profit is set aside for them. Workers from non-certified farms also knew about Fairtrade and expressed the hope that their farms would become certified because they hoped to profit from the premiums. As one of them explained,

Fairtrade means that some stems come back to the employee. For example, 5 shilling of the 75 shilling for which a stem is being sold comes back to the employee.

As this quote indicates, workers do not perceive of this money as charity but as something they earn with their labour.

Also unlike what Dolan (2007) described, most employees we interviewed were familiar with the basic regulations governing the premium money. Elections for the FPC were taken seriously and general assemblies were well attended. The workers also knew that the Fairtrade rules precluded their ability to spend the premium money at their own will. The main restriction is that the premium has to be spent through projects. Only a small percentage can be given out to workers in cash.¹⁴ Although farm workers would prefer cash payments, this way of supplementing low wages was nothing new to them: long before Fairtrade was introduced, farms in Naivasha paid workers partly “in kind” – for instance, through sponsoring schools for the workers’ children.¹⁵ The obligation to work with projects has been justified by claims that the workers would not know how to manage their money themselves: “They would only spend it on alcohol,” said one manager who was responsible for the implementation of Fairtrade on the farm where he worked. This project-based and somewhat paternalistic approach of Fairtrade thus fits into the already-existing socio-economic configuration of the industry. However, its highly regulated manner was new, as was the official role

14 Data on premium use provided by Fairtrade Africa in 2015 shows that only 1% of the premium was given out as cash to workers.

15 For instance, the biggest flower farm, Oserian, had already established a school for the children of its workers by 1987 (see *Daily Nation*, Public tasks facing private companies, 5 June 1987, 6).

for workers in the decision of which projects to take on (cf. Klier 2012). Nevertheless, this new role did not enable workers to put the premium to use for achieving their “strategic” rather than “practical” interests (cf. Nelson, Martin, and Ewert 2007).

An instance of a practical interest is education, which is a popular goal for premium money, both among farms and workers.¹⁶ Projects such as bursaries for secondary education of workers’ children take a burden off the shoulders of parents. In addition, interviewed workers expressed appreciation for the provision of interest-free loans and subsidies that assist in purchasing items such as televisions, gas cookers, or even plots of land – goods they could otherwise not afford.

The obligatory community projects did not even always address such “practical” interests. One example is an environmentally friendly community cooker that was installed in 2011¹⁷ but did not seem to be in use in 2014. The majority of the farm workers are migrants who consider Naivasha to be “just a place of work” and plan to return to their region of origin after a number of years (Kunas 2011). They would rather use the premium money to invest in their community “back home,” but that is not in the interest of Fairtrade and farm management. The farms prefer to improve the dirty, cramped settlements in Naivasha where most of the workers live: managers complained that these settlements reflect negatively on the industry. The example of community projects shows that due to the regulations set by Fairtrade, premium money is sometimes put to use in the interest of the farms rather than in the interest of the workers (cf. the findings of Klier [2012]). This raises the question of how much say workers have with regard to the spending of the premium money and the extent to which they are “empowered.”

A large part of the premium money¹⁸ is spent on running the FPC and on what is called “capacity building”: training of committee members and workers to create “awareness.” There are “Fairtrade awareness days” and promotional materials such as Fairtrade shirts. These campaigns seem to be quite successful when we compare the recent rate of engagement among workers with Dolan’s (2007) findings 10 years ago. But although this “awareness” is meant to “empower” workers and provide them with a framework for organising themselves,¹⁹ we argue that it above all se-

16 Data from Fairtrade Africa shows that 26% of the premium money was spent on educational projects.

17 See *Daily Nation*, Smart is when you convert, 1 March 2011.

18 16% of the premium, according to the Fairtrade Africa data.

19 In the Fairtrade Standard for Hired Labour: “Training for workers is essential in order to achieve empowerment” (Fairtrade International 2014: 15).

cures their compliance. Likewise, as indicated by Reynolds (2012), committees might build trust between workers and managers but they have no legal status and are connected to single farms. They therefore help to maintain peaceful industrial relations, but we argue that they do not provide workers with more political leverage. In short, committees and “awareness” activities that are funded with premium money are not necessarily empowering but are rather instrumental to establishing the governance of Fairtrade that Dolan (2007) pointed towards in her analysis.

Fairtrade and the Freedom of Association

An important principle of Fairtrade in the context of hired labour – which sets it apart from some other certifications (see Riisgaard 2009) – is improving labour conditions through unionisation.²⁰ This aspect is less well known to workers, and with reason. Unionisation and the introduction of collective bargaining agreements (CBA) in the flower industry in Naivasha started years before Fairtrade established itself there. The first flower farm in Naivasha, DCK, had signed an agreement with the trade union KPAWU as early as 1971.²¹ Also, many of the demands in the Fairtrade Standard for Hired Labour overlap with the contemporary CBAs – for instance, with regard to working hours, annual leave, and provision of a housing allowance (Anker and Anker 2014). Adherence to the CBA thus does not make a significant difference in farms that are Fairtrade-certified.

In addition to being superfluous, this emphasis on unionisation overlooks power inequalities. It assumes that workers’ rights will be properly secured once there is an active trade union. Yet, although collective representation might enhance the political leverage of workers, employers (or even indirect forces from outside, such as preferences of buyers) still have the final say in setting labour conditions. In addition, Fairtrade’s approach does not recognise that trade unions themselves are not void of politics.²² In Naivasha, we observed internal conflicts within a union and cases where employees did not feel adequately represented by shop stewards.²³

20 “Fairtrade International promotes the rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining as the foundation of ensuring workers’ rights, and considers independent and democratic trade unions the best means for achieving this” (Fairtrade International 2014: 3).

21 *Kenya Gazette*, Gazette Notice No. 1312, 26 April 1974.

22 See Riisgaard (2009: 333) on the historical connection between the union KPAWU and the former ruling party KANU.

23 A conspicuous example where politics clearly played a role is the case in which a local union leader was dismissed by the union branch office after he testified

Fairtrade's Drive for a Living Wage

The final pillar of Fairtrade in the context of the flower industry is the goal of a so-called “living wage.” A report written for Fairtrade (Anker and Anker 2014: 2) estimated that a living wage in Naivasha in 2014 would be over KES 14,000, excluding benefits such as a housing allowance. Yet, basic salaries for general workers of both certified and non-certified farms that followed the CBA roughly ranged from KES 5,000 to 10,000. Although salaries increased with length of employment, even general workers who had worked on the same farm for 20 years did not earn the above-mentioned living wage (ibid: 40). Moreover, the report (ibid.: 6) points out that real wages for flower-farm workers have dropped significantly over the years, even though nominally they have increased.

Fairtrade strives for the payment of a living wage. At the same time, it has not made increased wages a requirement (Fairtrade International 2014: 22). It allows the farms to argue that paying a living wage is not possible under current economic conditions. Perhaps as a consequence, Happ (2016) did not find significant differences between the wages of permanent employees in Fairtrade-certified farms and those of permanent employees on other Naivasha farms. Fairtrade focuses on enhancing the financial situation of workers through other measures, such as premium benefits (cf. Klier 2012). In effect, and despite the explicit aim of securing a “living wage,” Fairtrade’s policy might reduce pressure on the farms to pay significantly higher wages and thus diminish the negotiation space of workers, at least when it comes to wages paid in the near future.

Certifications as Depoliticisation

The previous sections showed how certifications and their standardised “sustainability” gained importance in the cut-flower industry and discussed certifications’ limited effects on power relations at the farm level. Certifications’ assertions that they are creating a sustainable industry carry moral and political connotations. However, they are the outcomes of economic processes of coordination and power relations as analysed above. We therefore argue that the shift to certifications and especially to Fairtrade has led to a “depoliticisation” as defined by Swyngedouw (2014).

In the case of the cut-flower industry, certifications do *not* “fundamentally question the existing state of the neo-liberal political economic

at the International Criminal Court in The Hague (Peter Otieno Ombude v. Kenya Plantation & Agricultural Workers [2015] eKLR).

configuration” (Swyngedouw 2014: 123); instead, they have become (or perhaps have always been) a substantial part of this configuration. For instance, Fairtrade offers technical solutions, such as the premium, that fit into the existing globalised capitalist system with its market-based, monetary solutions. Thus, certifications obscure the workings of the market instead of questioning them (cf. Luetchford 2011).

This acceptance of the status quo is not the only depoliticising effect of the introduction of certifications in the cut-flower industry. It is also a good example of what Swyngedouw describes as “the post-democratic inclusion of different opinions [...] in stakeholder arrangements of impotent participation and ‘good’ governance” (2014: 123).

There is a gap between those who are capable of translating the vague notion of “sustainability” into concrete measures and those who are responsible for the implementation of these measures. The interpretation of sustainability is mainly left to the creators of the standards of certification system – mostly actors from the industry or activists. It is therefore not part of a public and democratic legislative process, a situation exacerbated by the Kenyan state having interfered little in the cut-flower industry. But while industry actors and activists set the definition of sustainability, responsibility for the implementation of a “sustainable production” is mainly put on the shoulders of consumers and workers. The choice to promote sustainable production is left to consumers, who can select “sustainable” – that is, certified – products. On the production side, it is the workers who are (mainly implicitly) made responsible for changes in the production process (cf. Gibbon and Riisgaard [2014] on a general trend towards a “responsibilisation” of the work on the farms). This responsibility of the workers is also implicit in the approach of Fairtrade, which we took as an example. Its standards are geared towards attaining a more “sustainable” production by strengthening the position of workers: “Fairtrade believes that people’s ability to implement sustainable environmental and social practices depends on their incomes and standards of living.”²⁴

However, Fairtrade does not seem to profoundly change labour relations, as was also concluded by Smith and Barrientos (2005: 196) and Hale and Opondo (2005: 317). Its main means to “empower” the workers is the premium money. This premium gives employees a sense of ownership and assists them on crucial points – for example, in educating their children. But due to all the regulations set by Fairtrade itself with

24 Fairtrade International, *Fairtrade’s Contribution to a More Sustainable World*, online: <www.fairtrade.net/fileadmin/user_upload/content/2009/resources/2010-12-31_flo-sustainability-position-paper.pdf> (8 October 2015).

regards to how the premium should be spent, whether the premium evens out unequal labour relations is questionable. Another example is that Fairtrade promotes self-development and education to enable workers to leave the flower industry. Although such projects might help individuals, they do not change conditions in the industry itself. Eventually, it seems certification schemes in the Naivasha flower industry above all strengthen the position of the industry and capital, while claiming to solve the issue of “unsustainability.”

Finally, regarding laws and state regulations, the effects of rising importance of certifications are twofold and even contradictory: On the one hand, many certifications require compliance with national and regional regulations; therefore, they strengthen the enforcement of the existing institutional framework. On the other hand, farms primarily comply with industry-based, voluntary, non-state regulations. In another case, of tea plantations in Darjeeling (Besky 2014), farm managers even used the existence of certifications to argue in favour of the abolishment of more stringent national legislation. These industry-based regulations do not have the democratic, public nature of state legislations.

Conclusion and Outlook

This article showed how the emergence of a new value chain of direct sales, now coexisting with the traditional system of selling flowers through auctions, changed coordination mechanisms and governance structures in the global flower industry. A new demand for formal regulations created certification schemes. These certifications are legitimised by claims that they make the industry more “sustainable,” yet they first and foremost give more control to big buyers: European retail chains.

This appeal to “sustainability” fits into ongoing discussions and practices around Lake Naivasha, where before this shift to certifications farms and lobby groups were already engaged in “reputation management,” trying to denounce claims that their production practices are damaging the social-ecological system around the lake. For progressive farms around Naivasha, the step to becoming certified was thus not large, especially because standards of different certifications have overlapping requirements. And since the new markets in the direct sales value chain are not accessible without certifications, many farms decided to apply for them.

As it is clear now that a wish to become certified is mainly caused by governance structures in the value chain and by the need to access markets, rather than by the wish to make production practices more sustainable, one can ask what these certificates actually do within the farms

in Naivasha. The example of Fairtrade showed that it does not do what it explicitly aims to: change power relations in favour of the workers. Instead, these certifications bring in a new form of “governmentality” (cf. Dolan 2007). They have a depoliticising effect (cf. Swyngedouw 2014), as they effectively sideline discussions on labour conditions beyond what is included in the standards.

It is perhaps not surprising that certifications that emerged from the governance structure in the value chain do not question that structure itself. In order to achieve a transformation of the industry, these certifications should be more explicit about what they mean by “sustainability” (be it environmental, social, or economic). In addition, compliance with the rules set by these certifications should not be dependent on farms wishing to enter markets but should be made mandatory and should thus be induced from outside the value chain. In short, “the political” should be brought back into the process. On that note, recent attempts of TransFair, the German member organisation of Fairtrade, to influence German and European political debates and economic and environmental policies seem to be timely and much called for (Fairtrade Deutschland 2017). At the moment, rules for sustainability are mainly used as a tool to retain or gain control within the cut-flower industry rather than as a way of enhancing the possibility that “future generations” will still be able to use Lake Naivasha as a production site.

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Nachhaltigkeit und Entpolitisierung: Zertifikate in der Schnittblumenindustrie am Naivasha-See in Kenia

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag thematisiert die Verbreitung von Zertifizierungssystemen in der Schnittblumenindustrie von Naivasha, Kenia. Die Einführung von Zertifikaten wurde häufig damit legitimiert, dass sie zur Förderung der „Nachhaltigkeit“ beitragen. Die Autoren zeigen demgegenüber, dass ihrer Einführung vor allem die wachsende Bedeutung der neuen Wertschöpfungskette „Direktverkauf“ zugrunde lag. Sie widmen sich vor allem „Fairtrade“, dem bekanntesten Zertifikat in Naivasha. Es zielt darauf ab, die Nachhaltigkeit der Produktion über eine Stärkung der Arbeiter zu fördern, impliziert jedoch keine grundlegende Änderung der Machtverhältnisse in der Industrie. Die Autoren kommen zu dem Schluss, dass „Nachhaltigkeit“ im Fall von Naivasha ein unklares Konzept darstellt, das im Wesentlichen dazu dient, die Einführung von Zertifizierungen zu legitimieren. Statt grundlegende Veränderungen im Produktionsprozess anzustoßen, verschleiern und verfestigen die Zertifikate die bestehenden sozio-ökonomischen Strukturen in der Industrie. Entsprechend kann die Einführung von Zertifizierungen „entpolitisierende“ Wirkung haben.

Schlagwörter: Kenia, Internationaler Handel, Agroindustrie, Blumen, Arbeitsbeziehungen